

# ***Iowa City Press-Citizen***

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## **Great Places a great idea for efficiency**

### **The issue:**

- Gov. Tom Vilsack unveiled the Great Places initiative Monday.

### **We suggest**

- Great Places will improve state government's efficiency and responsiveness to communities.

### **What do you think?**

- Should state lawmakers fund the initiative?
- Send comments via e-mail to [opinion@ press-citizen.com](mailto:opinion@press-citizen.com).

Sometimes when a good idea comes along, we're all left wondering why it wasn't being done long ago.

Such is the case with the Great Places initiative that Gov. Tom Vilsack unveiled Monday. The plan is to coordinate 18 state agencies so they can respond holistically -- and hence more effectively -- to strengthen our communities.

Suppose Tiffin wanted to preserve historical barns that recently were annexed into its city limits. Fundraising for that currently is a formidable enough task, but certainly doable after a few years of organizing and applying for Department of Economic Development grants. But saving those barns probably will offer little payback in terms of tourism. That might require road signs -- a whole new project possible through Department of Transportation grants. A trail system connecting the barns also might be useful -- but would require a few more years of working through the Department of Natural Resources.

Under Great Places, Tiffin simply would write a thorough plan and submit it to the Department of Cultural Affairs -- which then would co-ordinate with Economic Development, the DOT and the DNR to get all aspects of the barn preservation project underway at the same time.

This result will be communities that quickly develop better attractions and features. Success can be achieved in a couple of years rather than a decade or more of work in which only pieces of a vision are realized. Sometimes our state's larger cities can draw the staff and resources necessary to pull off such results, but without state government coordination, it still ends up being more work than necessary.

Civic leaders across the state would agree -- in fact, that's what they told Cultural Affairs when it solicited suggestions about how to create such a program. Iowa City's John and Sandra Hudson, active in the metro area's art council and cultural incubator efforts, served on the program's design team.

Iowa needs the projects that Great Places would make a reality. If we are to stem the brain drain and draw businesses here, we must have the amenities that make people want to live in Iowa. We've already got much going for us: clean air and low crime in most communities, an excellent education system and a work ethic second to none. But in our new creative economy, we need to capitalize on those pluses with cultural, artistic and recreational features.

If lawmakers recognize this, they'll find the \$8 million Vilsack has requested for three pilot projects to prove Great Places actually will be more efficient than the current system of uncoordinated efforts. If funded, Cultural Affairs will hold regional forums this spring to explain the program. Communities then would submit proposals with awards announced possibly as soon as this autumn.

State government should work for the people and the communities it serves. If we see the value in funding economic development, cultural improvements, bicycle trails and dozens of other programs, certainly we should see the value in spending that money in an integrated, effective fashion. That's what Great Places aims to do. Let's see if it works.